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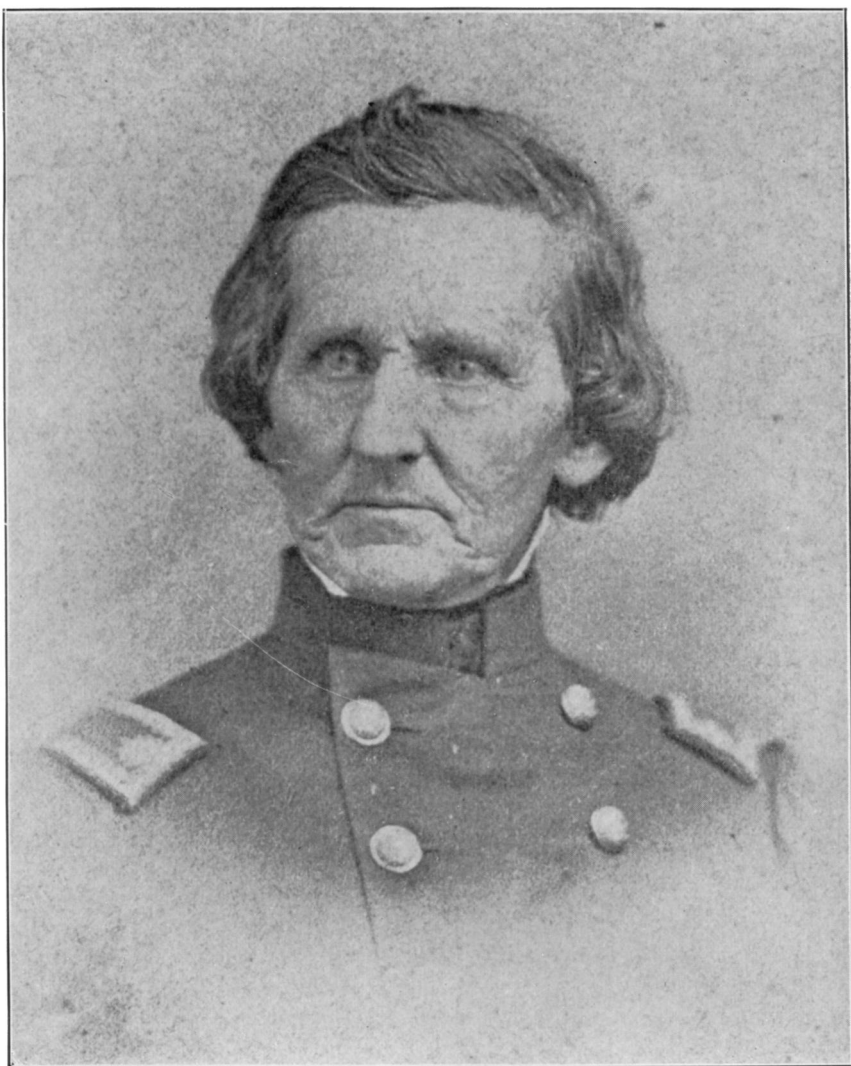
Forgotten Statesmen of Illinois **Hon. Robert Smith.**

By W. T. Norton.

The term "forgotten" may not with accuracy be applied to a statesman whose public acts are recorded in the journals of our legislative assemblies. Yet, when an individual—it matters not how illustrious—passes out of the limelight and off the stage of activity, he soon fades from the memory of the multitude and becomes a historic figure. Major Smith should not, perhaps, be styled a "forgotten" statesman, as but little more than half a century has passed since the close of his public duties, and he is still personally remembered by a few of our elderly citizens.

He came of an old colonial family of local distinction in New England. His father, Hon. John Smith, was for twelve years an influential member of the New Hampshire Legislature; and his uncle, Hon. Samuel Smith, an enterprising manufacturer, for several years represented his district in the National Congress. Robert Smith was born at Peterboro, New Hampshire, on June 12, 1802, and passed his boyhood on his father's farm. His education was obtained at the district schools and at the New Ipswich Academy. In 1820 he engaged in the manufacture of machinery, and later was interested in a cotton mill at Northfield. But he found those pursuits too restricted for the free exercise of his intellect, and studied law and was admitted to the bar. Opening an office in his native town, he commenced the practice of his profession, and on November 28, 1828, was united in marriage to Miss Sarah P. Bingham, of Lempster, New Hampshire.

Lured to the West by the great opportunities it offered to enterprise, ability and energy, he left the granite hills of his



MAJOR ROBERT SMITH

native State in the spring of 1832 and located at Alton, Illinois, and there resumed his legal profession. He soon saw, however, that the country was too new, and the people too poor, to assure quick profits for the lawyer; and, having some capital, he abandoned the law and engaged in the more remunerative business of dealing and speculating in lands. And he prospered. But the example of his father and uncle had inoculated him with the virus of political aspiration, and so effectual was its operation that he offered his services to the people and was elected a member of the Tenth General Assembly of Illinois, 1836-38, four years after his arrival in the State. His colleagues from Madison County in that Legislature were Cyrus Edwards, in the Senate, and James Semple and John Hogan, in the House. He was again elected in 1838 to the Eleventh Assembly, with George Churchill for Senator, and William Otwell and George Smith, in the lower House. Lincoln was a member of both these Assemblies, and Douglas of the Tenth.

The legislation of the Tenth and Eleventh General Assemblies, in which Mr. Smith served, was the most extraordinary enacted in the early history of the State. Illinois had defeated the machinations of the slave power and was then forever freed from the long threatened blight of human bondage. In expelling Black Hawk and his band from its limits, in 1832, it removed for all time the further menace of hostile Indians. In peace with all the world, and with population rapidly increasing, the spirit of progress incited its statesmen to devote their efforts to devising ways and means for the development of its great natural resources, and thereby benefit the condition of its people. Although the main plan then adopted of a vast system of internal improvements based upon the State's credit proved a disastrous failure, it demonstrated the willingness of the Representatives to assume extreme responsibilities to attain the desired objects. And that course was sanctioned by the people; for though the members of those two Assemblies, by incurring a public debt of many millions of dollars, placed the State on the verge of bankruptcy, few, if any, of them were condemned by their

constituents for their honestly mistaken acts, but continued the most of them in public life, and promoted many to higher stations.

As a legislator, Robert Smith was untiring in his efforts to advance the welfare of the State in general, and particularly that of his county. He supported the internal improvement measures, and was very industrious in securing for the people of Madison County charters for various roads, toll bridges, public institutions, and such other privileges and benefits that the Legislature could bestow.

While faithfully attentive to every duty as a public servant Mr. Smith never lost sight of his own interests and was always alert to take advantage of every opportunity presented that might add to his prosperity or personal popularity. He was soon known as an astute and able politician and successful dealer in real estate, acquiring in time many hundred acres of valuable land. His tact for retaining popular favor was well shown during the Lovejoy riots at Alton in 1837, when the entire populace was frenzied with wild excitement. He was then one of the most prominent citizens of Alton, a member of the Legislature, and presumably a leader of public opinion. But in no account of the disgraceful acts of the mob, or efforts of the few to sustain law and order, or of the litigation that followed, does the name of Robert Smith appear. As a native of New England, his sympathies must have been for Lovejoy, but the mob was almost wholly of his own political party; and to array himself with either side would necessarily incur the enmity of the other. So, by maintaining a course of masterly inactivity he avoided giving offense to either, and came out of the troubles with prestige unimpaired.

From the first apportionment of the State for Representative in Congress (1833) Madison and St. Clair Counties were in the same district, and the Congressman had invariably been chosen from St. Clair—Slade, Reynolds, Snyder, then Reynolds again, the latter serving for seven and a half years, much to the disgust of incipient statesmen in the other counties, who thought the honor should be passed around.

The climax came in 1843, when Reynolds was again "in the hands of his friends" for re-election to the Twenty-eighth Congress. Shields, who was elected (by the Legislature) State Auditor in 1841—made famous by his challenge to Lincoln to fight a duel in 1842—resigned in March, 1843, and hurried to his home at Belleville to run against Reynolds. The Democratic politicians of the district were very tired of Reynolds, and those in St. Clair County, outside of a certain clique, saw that nothing would be gained by replacing him with Shields. About that time the new convention system had been tried in the East with general satisfaction, and the Democrats here, seeing in it a means of relief, concluded to adopt it. Thereupon they ordered meetings to be held in all the counties of the district, to select delegates to represent them in a Congressional Convention, called to meet later at Kaskaskia. As St. Clair County would present three candidates to the convention—for Lyman Trumbull had "allowed his friends to use his name" in that connection—Mr. Smith, thinking there might be a chance to break the hold of St. Clair County on that office, so manipulated the Madison County meeting as to have its delegates instructed to vote for himself.

My friend, Dr. J. F. Snyder, the well known historian and scientist, who remembers Mr. Smith well, says, in a private letter: "I think Judge Gillespie was mistaken in one minor particular respecting Mr. Smith's first candidacy for Congress in 1843. In his *Recollections of Early Illinois*, pp. 48-49, he says 'the convention at Kaskaskia was called for the ulterior purpose of getting rid of General Shields, who insisted on running for Congress.' That, perhaps, was true, too; for Shields aspired to every office which he thought might be in his possible reach. But the impression I—then a school boy—gained from the talk I heard among Belleville politicians was that their main object was to get rid of Reynolds."

The account in full given by Judge Gillespie, to which Dr. Snyder referred, is as follows: "A plot had been laid to defeat Shields, in spite of his majority, which was that Smith was to solicit from Shields a few of his delegates, which, when added to the Madison County delegation, would give Smith a

respectable complimentary vote. Shields fell into the trap, and said nothing would afford him greater pleasure, and desired Smith to name the men, and Shields requested them to vote on the first ballot for Smith. Cameron (the secretary of the convention) immediately made up the roll and placed those Shields delegates at the head, then followed the names of the delegates who were for Reynolds and Trumbull, and Smith's own men, and lastly, the names of the rest of the Shields delegates. This gave Smith the majority, and quicker than lightning the result was announced, and Smith declared the nominee, and motion to adjourn *sine die* carried.

"Shields and his friends were dumbfounded for the instant, but in a few minutes he recovered his self-possession and pledged himself to support the nominee. The great object was to get rid of Shields. Smith, it was supposed, could be brushed aside at any time. It was understood, however, that Smith had stipulated that in the event of his success on that occasion, he was not to be in the way of Governor Reynolds in the future.

"Smith was elected, and by dint of close application to business and the free use of the franking privilege, he soon made himself immensely popular with the people of his district. He procured the names of all the voters and sent to every one either a letter or public document, and attended to their wants with such promptness and assiduity that he stole away the hearts of the people and became invincible for many years. As soon as the sessions of Congress were over he spent all his time among his constituents and availed himself of the opportunities afforded by the courts of seeing many of them together. On his return from the first session he was visiting one of the courts where Reynolds was. The latter did not seem to like the way Smith busied himself amongst the people, and he reminded him of his pledge—not to be in his way. Smith said: 'Oh, Governor, I am just round returning thanks.' Said the Governor: 'Smith, that may be so, but your manœuvring looks to me a devilish sight more like *grace* before meals than *thanks* after.' "

The new delegate plan of nominating candidates proved fatal to the aspirations of many of the old pioneer type of office hunters, like Reynolds, who previously nominated themselves and depended for election upon their notoriety and individual exertions, as is now effected by our primary law.

At the next Congressional Convention of the First district, in 1845, Robert Smith and Governor Reynolds were again candidates, and Smith was again nominated. Reynolds, charging Smith with unfairness and duplicity, ran independently on his ancient record and was badly beaten, receiving little more than the Whig vote. At the convention two years later Smith and Trumbull were the candidates, and Trumbull was nominated. Smith claiming—no doubt correctly—that the convention had been dishonestly packed, ran as an untrammelled Democrat, and was again elected.

As a Congressman, Mr. Smith proved to be a faithful and able servant of the people, remarkably attentive, active and industrious. He was a ready and forcible speaker, quick to grasp the salient points in debate, and never at a loss in presenting his arguments with telling effect. On December 27, 1844, he made a notable speech in Congress on the bill, "To reduce and graduate the price of public lands." He advocated the passage of the bill in the warmest terms, as necessary to settlement and development of the West. In the opening of his speech he made this telling point:

"Mr. Chairman, I would ask in what does the wealth of our country consist? Is it in the millions of wild, unimproved lands? No, sir. It is in the labor laid out upon those lands, rendering them productive; the improvements put upon them, the minerals dug out of them by the enterprising miners, the annual crops produced by the labor of the cultivators. These, sir, are the sources of our wealth; and when the government shall adopt the true policy in the disposition of our public lands every free man will have it in his power to become a freeholder. If the government, by giving away the public lands which have been on the market for ten years, could thereby insure the making of a good farm on every half or

quarter section of these lands, it would be a profitable and judicious disposition of them."

This thought was ably elaborated and expanded in a logical manner and proved a powerful plea in favor of putting the public lands within the reach of all, making them independent and freeing the debtor from dependence on the creditor. I do not know the fate of this particular bill, but it was clearly the forerunner of the policy subsequently adopted by the government for the pre-emption of the public lands. It stamped Robert Smith as a far seeing advocate of a wise and judicious public policy. He was in advance of his time, but his views were those of the seer and the statesman.

Another noteworthy speech by Mr. Smith was delivered during the discussion of the "Harbor and River Bill," February 26, 1845. He made it the occasion for a plea in favor of appropriations for the continuation of the famous Cumberland Road from its then terminus to the Mississippi. He reviewed the long history of the road from its inception in 1806 to 1838, and advocated the continuance of that policy in the following amendment:

"For the Cumberland Road, to be divided in equal parts in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, \$300,000." This was agreed to by a vote of 70 yeas to 43 nays, which was a clear victory for Mr. Smith.

Now, note the sequel: The bill was then reported back to the House (the speech had been delivered in Committee of the Whole) and the appropriation was reduced to \$75,000 for each of the three States named. In this form the bill passed both Houses of Congress, but was finally defeated by being "pocketed" by President Tyler.

Thus, the completion of this great national enterprise was defeated. If pushed forward as projected, it would have passed through Illinois, with its terminus on the Mississippi at either Alton or St. Louis. That the great project failed was due to President Tyler, a stickler for State rights and an opponent of national appropriations within the States. But the honor of passing the bill through Congress is due to Mr. Smith. This speech of our Congressman was the com-

plement of his former address on the public land bill. He claimed, and rightly, that the completion of the Cumberland Road would facilitate the settlement and improvement of the public lands.

These speeches reveal Mr. Smith in a very pleasant light. They show that while devoted to the interests of his constituents, he realized that he was also sent to Washington to legislate for the entire country, and that he was indeed a statesman of broad and liberal views.

At the close of his third term in Congress Mr. Smith was not a candidate for re-election, as he knew it would be futile to contend with the brilliant war record of Colonel Bissell, who succeeded him without opposition. But his restless energy permitted no idleness. Returning home, he immediately engaged, with his characteristic vigor, in several large business enterprises. "He furnished most of the means for construction of the immense water power, which has contributed so much to the growth and prosperity of Minneapolis," and was largely interested in various ways in railroad lines that were then pushing their way into and across Illinois. In its rivalry with St. Louis for commercial supremacy, Alton had no worker for its success more zealous and persevering than Robert Smith. He was the leading spirit in the great railroad convention, held at Hillsboro in October, 1849, that instigated the famous "State Policy," sanctioned by the Legislature, requiring all railroads crossing the State to have their terminals within its limits. Hence, the Chicago and Alton road, the Terre Haute and Alton road, etc., which were continued to St. Louis only after Don Morrison effectually nullified the "State Policy" by having the Seventeenth General Assembly pass his bill incorporating the Ohio and Mississippi railroad.

Both Douglas and Lincoln were colleagues of Mr. Smith in the State Legislature, and also in the lower House of Congress. In his several elections to Congress he had the distinction of defeating such eminent men as Governor Reynolds, General Shields, Lyman Trumbull and Governor Koerner. In the turbulent era consequent upon repeal of

the Missouri Compromise he stood firmly for maintaining the Union, but never faltered in his loyalty to the Democratic party. When later his old party leaders, Palmer, Trumbull, Bissell, Koerner and many others, left it for the new Republican organization he remained steadfast in his fidelity to Jeffersonian principles. At the height of the wild political turmoil in 1856, when, in his district, it became necessary to select candidates for the Thirty-fifth Congress, both parties approached the contest with much trepidation, the Republicans gravely doubting their strength and the Democrats conscious of their weakness after recent numerous desertions from their party. Finally the Republicans nominated Koerner, the German leader of Belleville, whose term as Lieutenant Governor had just expired. They regarded him, next to Bissell, as the strongest man in the district, which was largely colonized by Germans, nearly all of whom had followed him and Bissell into the new camp.

At the election, "Colonel John Thomas, of St. Clair County," Governor Koerner says, in his *Memoirs*, vol. II, p. 35, "was beaten by a considerable majority by Don Morrison for the short term, and Robert Smith, a shrewd, wily politician, who had formerly been a member of Congress and had been resurrected for the occasion, was elected for the long term"—in fact, defeating Koerner in every county in the district, excepting St. Clair. An anecdote of that campaign, often told by Smith, tends to justify the epithet of "wily politician" applied to him by Governor Koerner. Smith neither drank liquor of any kind nor used tobacco in any way, but in his round of electioneering he went into a saloon at Highland, a German village in the eastern part of Madison County, and, laying a large gold coin on the counter, asked the proprietor to "treat his friends when they came in, to that amount. Shoving the coin back to him, the honest Teuton said: "No, keep your money, Mr. Schmit; you haf no frients here." Nevertheless, Smith carried that precinct at the election by a handsome majority.

In both sessions of that Congress Mr. Smith, as in the others before, was a very busy and active Representative,

closely attentive to the wants of his constituents and State. In the momentous questions of public policy then agitating all classes of the people he ably seconded every effort of Senator Douglas to harmonize antagonisms and avert the impending danger of serious national trouble. With the adjourning of Congress Mr. Smith retired from further direct participation in party politics. He supported Douglas for the Presidency in 1860, without taking a very prominent part in that exciting campaign. When, later, the States engaged in the horrors of civil war, Mr. Smith, still a Democrat and ultra Union man, past the military age, not rugged physically and not fired by military ambition, remained quietly at his home. But President Lincoln, long knowing his integrity of character and strict reliability, appointed him paymaster of volunteers, with the rank of major, and in that responsible position he served very capably until retired by disability.

Quite young then, my only remembrance of Major Smith is having seen him one day, in the full uniform of his rank, as he entered his carriage in front of his handsome residence, when starting to the railroad station to go to his office in St. Louis, where he was stationed. He had a splendid estate in Middle Alton, comprising several acres, ornamented with fine trees of various kinds, many of them imported from foreign lands. The extensive grounds were surrounded by a lilac hedge, which, in full bloom, filled the air with fragrance. It was the admiration of my boyhood and of all who saw it. Only the older residents remember the attractions of that beautiful homestead, with its grand old monarchs of the native forest and choice growth of exotics, for it long since passed into other hands and was subdivided into town lots, upon which have been erected twenty or more stately homes.

I, of course, have no personal knowledge of Major Smith, but from all sources of information at hand we must infer that he was an unusual man, of more than ordinary ability, unexceptional moral character and high sense of honor. In Dr. Snyder's letter, to which I have before referred, he further says: "Mr. Smith was not quite six feet tall, of sinewy athletic build, and usually dressed and looked

like a brisk business man. He was a pleasant talker, an impressive stump speaker, and his genial, sunny disposition and cordial handshake were well calculated to captivate the average voter. Electioneering was with Governor Reynolds a studied art, in which he excelled; with Smith it was a natural trait, surpassed by very few. His wonderful memory of faces and names enabled him to instantly recognize and call by name any one he met to whom he had once been introduced, it mattered not where or how long before. I remember seeing him suddenly leave those he was talking with on the sidewalk, rush to the middle of the street to shake hands with a passing farmer, he had probably met once before, and earnestly inquire about his health and that of each member of his family, and finally ask him how the crop was this year on his northeast forty. Our people, in St. Clair County, did not regard Bob Smith as a great statesman, but they esteemed him for his real ability, his honesty, diligence and thorough devotion to their interests."

As I before stated, Major Smith was one of a very intelligent and enterprising family. Two of his brothers, William H. and James, followed him to the West, embarking at St. Louis in the mercantile business. There they became wealthy and prominent citizens, distinguished for their liberality, philanthropy and zeal for advancement of religion and education. James Smith was the founder of Smith's Academy there, which bears his name, and was a generous donor to Washington University, with which the Smith Academy is affiliated. William H. Smith was also a man of commanding ability and sterling integrity, who left to his descendants a record of remarkable success and domestic devotion. Retiring from his long business career, he removed to Alton and purchased a large estate, which is still one of the great attractions of the city, and here he resided until his death at the age of 86 years. His son, the late William Elliott Smith, inheriting the business sagacity of his ancestors, founded the glass-making industry of Alton and was president of the Illinois Glass Company, the largest manufacturer of hollow glass-ware in the world. At his death the buildings of the company

covered an area of fifty acres and employed 3,500 hands. He died at Florence, Italy, while on a foreign tour, having with his family circumnavigated the world.

At the expiration of Major Smith's military service he returned to private life in impaired health, and at his beautiful home in Alton passed the remainder of his days in literary pursuits and the care of his large financial interests and extensive landed property. He was a Mason of high degree, and, with his family, brothers, and all his Smith relatives, was from his youth a member of the Unitarian Church. He had not long to wait for the final summons. It came in 1867, and he passed away at the age of 65 years. Interred in the city cemetery, his remains lie beneath a monument of Italian marble, from which—much to be regretted—every line of the inscription carved upon it has been obliterated by time and the elements. He was survived by two children, Robert Bingham Smith and Sarah Bingham Smith.